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Why are there no talks with the Taliban about girls' education?

World leaders are restarting their engagement with the Taliban — yet the stripping away of the rights of half of the population is not on the agenda.

Three years after the Taliban took over Afghanistan, systemic discrimination against girls and women, including violence, is rampant. Girls remain locked out of education once they reach the age of 12 and women are banned from most jobs, including nearly all forms of research and teaching. The list of prohibitions on women has been extended to include speaking or singing in public. Last week, some 130 women attended a conference in Tirana, Albania — the largest public gathering of Afghan women who met to discuss the crisis since the takeover. "In our country, we now live like prisoners," one delegate told *The Guardian* (see go.nature.com/3mostsa).

This shocking situation is made worse by the fact that the international community has no official mechanism or named initiative for talking with the Taliban about getting girls and women back to their lecture halls, libraries and laboratories. In a 22 August interview with the BBC, Richard Bennett, the United Nations special rapporteur for Afghanistan, said that there are no formal talks between the Taliban and the international community to return girls and women to education. He said: "The elephant in the room is why is there no working group [between the Taliban and other nations] to look at human rights and women's rights."

This is actually rather revealing. It confirms what researchers and human-rights organizations have been saying: world leaders do not attribute the same degree of importance to the rights of girls and women as they do to other issues. The Taliban have banned Bennett from entering the country. Where is the outrage from major world capitals?

This situation overall is completely unacceptable. The continued denial of rights also goes against a recommendation to the UN Security Council, the organization's highest decision-making body, by UN secretary-general António Guterres. Last November, Guterres told council members that the Taliban needed to comply with international law — including giving women the right to study and work without restriction — to be recognized as Afghanistan's legitimate government.

This cannot continue. If it does, the international community will be complicit in gender apartheid, which might soon be classed as a crime against humanity by the UN.

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Since the Taliban takeover, the number of students in Afghanistan's 167 public and private universities and higher-education institutes has more than halved, from 430,000 to just 200,000 students since 2021, according to data published by the UN science and cultural organization UNESCO, based in Paris. More than 2.5 million girls are already out of school, and if the education ban persists, that number could rise to more than 4 million by 2030, the UNESCO data show.

At the same time, a prolonged drought is contributing to severe food insecurity — with one in four people not knowing where their next meal will come from. The World Food Programme has put out an urgent appeal for US$617 million. This must be provided without delay. To be clear, humanitarian aid must never come with strings attached.

No other country recognizes the Taliban as Afghanistan's legitimate government, and nor does the UN. But this doesn't mean that relations are frozen. It's the opposite, with nations starting to reboot trade and diplomacy with the country. Last week, work started in Afghanistan on a pipeline that will send gas from Turkmenistan to India. In the same week, it was reported that the Taliban are looking to buy military hardware from Russia. And China is helping the Taliban to access some of the world's largest copper deposits, southeast of Kabul. It's a missed opportunity that these initiatives are not contingent on any movement on the education ban.

There are separate talks taking place hosted by the UN and Qatar. But here, too, the hosts agreed to the Taliban's demands that no women's organizations be represented and that the agenda for these talks would exclude education. The Taliban are seeking international recognition, including membership of the UN. Afghanistan desperately needs trade deals to revive an economy that is on its knees. Yet, it is unacceptable that the international community has effectively accepted Taliban conditions that there will be no formal talks on the education ban.

Taliban spokespeople say that they are listening to their "sisters" and working on a solution. No other country that has Islamic law as part of its legal system bans girls and women from education. When asked, representatives of the international community say that they raise the education ban with the Taliban at every available opportunity. This is better than nothing, but warm words of support are little comfort to the millions of girls and women who are in severe distress. For most women, the future is too worrying to contemplate. Researchers are even reporting examples of women contemplating taking their own lives (A. Q. Mohammadi *et al. J. Public Health* **46**, e439–e447; 2024).

There needs to be a mechanism for talks to end the education ban, with objectives, scheduled meetings and agreed timelines. It is hard to see how progress will be made if education is not even on the agenda. In his report to the UN on 9 September (see go.nature.com/3b8gybj) , Bennett said: "The Taliban appear to have taken a direction that only leads back to the appalling conditions of the late 1990s." The international community must unite and stand up for Afghanistan's girls and women, and not let the Taliban dictate the agenda.